RORY GALLAGHER

KICKBACK CITY

FEATURING THE LIE FACTORY A NOVELLA BY IAN RANKIN

ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY TRUMAN NARRATED BY AIDAN QUINN

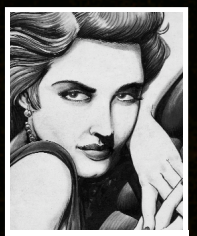
REMASTERED

IAN RANKIN
THE LIE FACTORY

ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY TRUMAN

REGAN P.I. in THE LIE FACTORY

Featuring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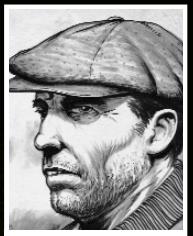
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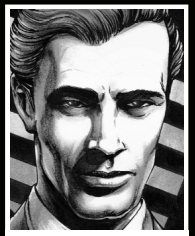
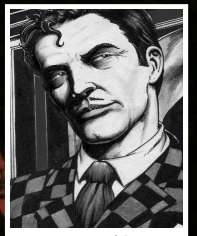

ANTHONY COSTELLO

ELINOR DEMPSEY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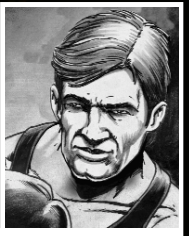
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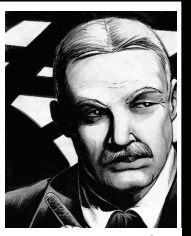
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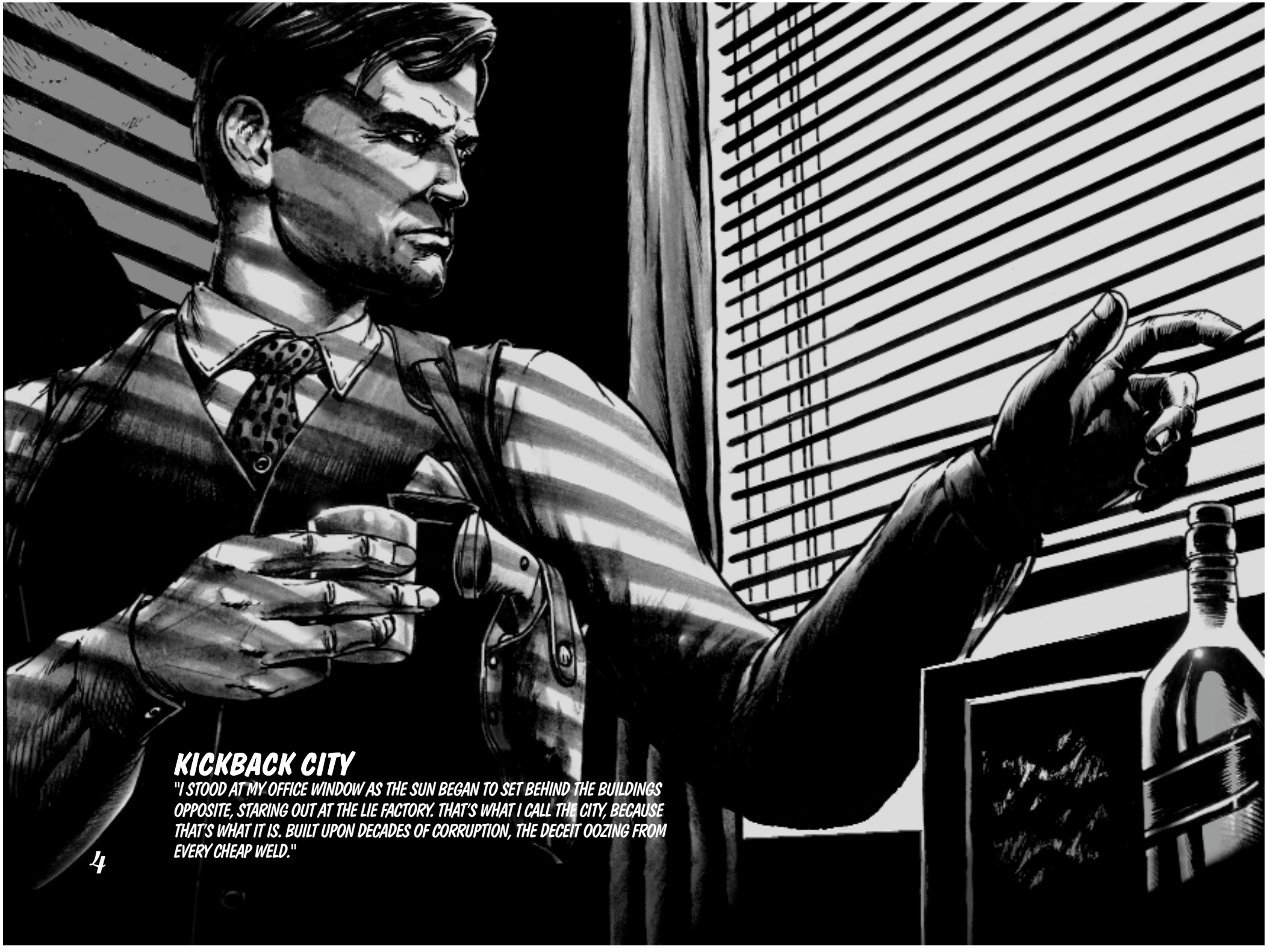

KICKBACK CITY
"I STOOD AT MY OFFICE WINDOW AS THE SUN BEGAN TO SET BEHIND THE BUILDINGS OPPOSITE, STARING OUT AT THE LIE FACTORY. THAT'S WHAT I CALL THE CITY, BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT IT IS. BUILT UPON DECADES OF CORRUPTION, THE DECEIT OOZING FROM EVERY CHEAP WELD."

THE LIE FACTORY

I stood at my office window as the sun began to set behind the buildings opposite, staring out at the Lie Factory.

That's what I call the city, because that's what it is. Built upon decades of corruption, the deceit oozing from every cheap weld. The politicians and businessmen, cops and pan-handlers - they all told lies. The newspapers, the housewives, the punks awaiting their chance in the darkening alley - lying came as naturally to them as breathing. The priests and teachers lied; so did the roustabouts and motor mechanics. Even old Mrs Delacourt who owned the deli across the street - earlier I'd asked her how she was feeling and she'd said 'fine', though there was no masking the pain as she stooped to reach for something on a low shelf. They reckoned it was cancer she had, the kind that takes its own sour time. Then there was the diner on the corner, where I'd asked last evening if the fish was fresh. 'Sure,' I'd been told. 'Delivered this morning.' Stella avoiding eye-contact as she spoke, hating herself for having to repeat the line fed to her by the greaseball who paid her wages. Just one more victim of the Lie Factory.

'I'm waiting,' the voice behind me said. I turned back into the room, resting my weight against a corner of my desk. The electric-fan hummed and rattled and there was smoke swirling in the air. The District Attorney bought expensive cigarettes - European by the aroma. I preferred to roll my own. The DA had a glass in his free hand. I'd offered him bourbon on arrival and he'd accepted. He had a good haircut and was clean-shaven. Blonde and blue-eyed, he'd probably been the football hero in college. Polished shoes, one leg crossed over the other so that an eggshell-blue silk sock was visible. His cologne was fighting its corner against the tobacco - not quite winning, but not about to quit. His name was Anthony Costello and he was here 'as a courtesy', by which he meant he could easily have had my carcass dragged the sixteen blocks to his office for this conversation. Instead, he had the only clean tumbler in the place while I sipped my own shot from a chipped mug that had once belonged in Stella's diner.

He was waiting, just like he said, but not very patiently. He was a busy man with a full diary, and I was betting that at the top of each day were written the words 'Don't Screw Up'. That was because Anthony Costello was the apple of the city's eye, and his daddy's millions were readying to see him elevated to the senate. He just had the one problem: a rich ex-girlfriend had turned up dead in a part of town nice people tended not to frequent,

and my business card had been found in her purse.

'Client confidentiality, Mr Costello,' I said, stubbing my cigarette into the ashtray.

'Don't give me that crap, Regan. I could have your licence.'

'Yes, you could,' I admitted, leaving it at that and brushing flecks of ash from my tie.

'If Agatha was in some sort of trouble, why didn't she turn to her family and friends? Why did she come to *you?'*

I shrugged. 'I'm in the phone book. Even paid a couple of bucks so my name's in a nice clear type.'

Costello just stared at me. I got the feeling that in most other situations, he would have stared *through* me. I wasn't part of his world and never would be. Once he had a satisfactory answer, he'd be gone and there'd be a line through my name in his mental ledger.

'They still questioning Kid Gloves?' I asked into the silence.

Costello nodded. 'He's not very talkative.'

'Does he have to be? I heard he was covered in blood…'

Costello almost winced, and in that moment I felt for him. The blood had belonged to someone he'd known since childhood and had dated for a few months. Agatha Dempsey was maybe the only risk he'd taken his whole life, and she'd been a risk worth taking: the younger daughter of 'Duke' Dempsey, who was one of the most powerful men in the city. She was beautiful but free-spirited even a touch reckless. How else to explain her little tourist excursion to the seamier side of the street? How else to explain her ending up ripped to shreds in a back-alley, having rejected the advances of a fading middleweight boxer?

Helluva shame though: Kid Gloves had won me a few dollars down the years.

'Way I hear it,' I commented to the DA, 'he'd had a bellyful of whiskey. Celebrating a hard-earned KO.'

Costello just grunted. 'Look,' he said, 'there's a funeral the Dempseys need to start planning, so if you've nothing you feel able to tell me…'

'Just that her family have my condolences - and so do you.'

He gave me a look he'd probably given opponents on the football field, then rose slowly to his feet and pushed his hand through his hair.

'Your sympathy wasn't what I needed, Regan. And be warned: I know how to hold a grudge.'

SECRET AGENT
"HE JUST HAD THE ONE PROBLEM:
A RICH EX-GIRLFRIEND HAD TURNED UP DEAD IN A PART OF
TOWN NICE PEOPLE TENDED NOT TO FREQUENT, AND MY BUSINESS CARD
HAD BEEN FOUND IN HER PURSE."

'Maybe you can give me a lesson some time.'

I showed him to the door, waited until I could hear his footsteps on the stairs, then crossed to the window again to watch him exit the building and get into his automobile. The sun had been reduced to a warm orange glow. I wondered what Anthony Costello was hiding - probably not very much. Agatha was no longer his betrothed, just something to be dealt with before he could move on. He had that senate seat waiting…

I grabbed my tobacco and lighter, then reached into the desk-drawer for my gun. It was a small snub-nosed model that caused my few cop-friends to grin and question its owner's masculinity, but it fit in my jacket without creating a conspicuous bulge, and at close quarters it would punch a hole in a man as surely as any cannon. I studied my reflection in the window, checking that I was properly attired for an evening of questions in the Lie Factory.

Some people called him Stevedore because his beat was the docks. Others called him Prairie Dog due to an uncanny facial resemblance. He was the guy you went to when you needed a loan and didn't have the kinds of looks the Main Street banks admired. His real name was Albert Deutz, and I knew I'd find him in his regular booth at the Blood Bank. Actually, the bar had no name - no distinguishing features of any kind. From the outside it could have been flophouse or warehouse or awaiting demolition. But the amount of red stuff that flowed some nights, it was like the regulars were providing donations. The barkeep knew me from my single previous visit and poured a generous measure of something that had once been forty-proof.

'I'm very, very upset,' Deutz informed me as I sat across from him. He was picking between his teeth with a blackened thumbnail. 'Who do I go to now for my money?'

'Chalk it up to experience,' I suggested. Deutz's eyes narrowed.

'Maybe I'll put a bit of pressure on you instead.'

'Do I look like I'm good for it?'

'Or her sister - family's not going to want The Duke knowing his youngest checked out with debts unpaid…'

'You'd have to take that up with the sister.'

'Ever met her? I hear tell she's a piece of work.'

'Why do you think the Kid did it?' I took a sip of the diluted drink.

'All I know is, that was a fight the sonofabitch should never have won.'

'Were you ringside?'

Deutz nodded. 'Keeping an eye on every last one of my clients, checking who would be doling out excuses come vig day.' He paused.

'I had twenty bucks on Mathis in seven.'

'Smart money seems to have been on the Kid in four.'

He snorted and started working away at his teeth again.

'I doubt anyone placed *that* bet.'

'So are we done?' I eventually asked.

'I need to consider my options.'

'Don't strain yourself,' I said, sliding out from the booth.

'They're a rich family, Regan. Hardly seems fair *I'm* the one out of pocket.'

'How else do you think people like that get rich, Albert? Visit a library and pick up any history book from the shelf....'

On the way out I paid the barkeep half what he wanted, and told him I'd maybe have some whiskey with my water next time.

That night I sat in my apartment and held a little wake of my own, playing back memories of Agatha Dempsey. She'd walked into my office one fine day a week or so back, giving a false name and saying she'd got me from a listing. Then she'd settled herself, allowed me to light her cigarette, and told me she owed some money to a man called Albert Deutz. The sum involved was not vast but Deutz was being persistent and unreasonable and she wanted someone to have a word with him.

'I'm sure your father would oblige, Miss Dempsey.'

That had caused the blood to rise up her slender neck to her cream-coloured cheeks. She had lots of straw-blonde hair, pulled back from her face and tied in a pony-tail. Emerald-green eyes accentuated by the right make-up. Her clothes were probably the height of fashion and they had been constructed with nobody's measurements but hers in mind.

SLUMMING ANGEL
"HOW MUCH OF A THRILL TO MAKE A DEAL WITH A LOANSHARK, AND ENGAGE A PRIVATE EYE, AND GO DRINKING IN POORTOWN?"

Some men would have called her a knockout; to me she looked more like a blow to the solar plexus - best avoided, in my experience.

'All right,' she said, 'so you recognise me.'

'Some days I get round to reading a paper.'

'Then you'll know that my father is not someone to be trifled with.'

I nodded slowly. 'I also know your reputation precedes you, Miss Dempsey.'

More colour flushed her face. I didn't doubt that half the rumours I'd heard were exaggerations or downright lies. On the other hand, Duke Dempsey had friends in the highest places, so I'd probably been spared a few of Agatha's true-life adventures, too. She was like fact and fiction, all wrapped up into one. I was seated behind my desk, and she'd risen to her feet, smoothed her skirt down, and walked over towards me.

'I don't want my father bothered with this,' she'd said, her voice husky.

'There must be high-rolling friends you could borrow from.'

But she'd shaken her head. 'This is between Mr Deutz and me, and I fully intend keeping to our agreement. I just need some time.'

'So tell him.'

'I've tried. I need someone who can be a little more persuasive.'

'I don't come free, and bearing in mind what you've just told me, I might want payment in advance.'

She leaned down over the desk. 'Not a problem, Mr Regan,' she said, her eyes glittering. Then she lifted one of my business cards and slipped it down the front of her blouse before straightening up again. 'You know, you're not quite what I expected.'

'You should see some of the bums who call themselves PIs.'

'You're certainly no bum.' She studied me from top to toe, as if seeking the price-tag, the tip of her tongue playing across those full ruby lips.

I leaned back in my chair until it gave a groan of protest. 'What about Danny Booth?' I asked.

The name brought her up short and the tongue disappeared. Her face hardened and she retreated to her own chair and the smouldering cigarette waiting there. 'You're well-informed, Mr Regan,' she said.

'I know he's in jail and all, but one of his boys would surely talk to Deutz if you asked nicely.'

'If you don't want the job, please come out and say as much.' She now sounded child-like and petulant, unused to not getting her way. I shrugged.

'It's just that you've got all these other avenues, Miss Dempsey, and instead you consult the telephone directory.'

'Because it's *my* business, not theirs! All I'm asking of you is an hour of your time to talk some sense into this man.'

'And you realise that's all I'll do? I'm not going to take a sap to the side of his head.'

'Maybe that's why I don't want Danny involved, Mr Regan.'

'Maybe it is at that,' I agreed.

So I'd negotiated with Albert Deutz and he'd told me the one thing he couldn't understand was why she'd gone to him in the first place.

'Only explanation that makes sense is: she likes taking risks. Same reason she started dating Danny Booth.'

Danny Booth: gangster. Not major league but looking for an opening. Surrounded by a pretty good team, but that hadn't stopped Anthony Costello taking him down. Word was, Costello's old man had put some cash out there, buying information until there was enough for a case against Booth. Not watertight, but winnable. The right jury on the day, and Booth - the 'legitimate businessman' - was on his way to the pen.

Had it been serious with Agatha? I didn't think so. She'd been arm-candy and Booth had probably liked that her father was Duke Dempsey. The Duke would have broken it up eventually if Costello hadn't got there first, but I was reminded of Deutz's theory that Agatha liked taking risks. I saw her suddenly as a slumming angel, protected from danger. How much of a thrill must it have been for her to hang out in night-clubs with Danny Booth and his entourage? How much of a thrill to make a deal with a loanshark, and engage a Private Eye, and go drinking in Poortown? Lots of thrills for a messed-up little rich girl, right up until the moment Kid Gloves gouged a hole in her face with a bottle.

BARLEY & GRAPE RAG
"THE KID: BACK ON HOME TURF WITH SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE. YET DRINKING WITHOUT A RETINUE. HIS ALIBI SHOELACE-THIN: WOKE UP IN AN ALLEY WITH BLOOD ON HIS HANDS AND A BODY AT HIS FEET"

The Kid: back on home turf with something to celebrate. Yet drinking without a retinue. His alibi shoelace-thin: woke up in an alley with blood on his hands and a body at his feet; couldn't remember much of anything. Then a name: Rosetta. He'd bought her drinks. She would vouch for him. Only there was no Rosetta to be questioned. Sure, people knew the name, but no more than that.

It wasn't as if the residents of Poortown owed the cops and the authorities anything. Violent death was a by-product of life in that corner of the Lie Factory.
It was just that the corpses didn't alwayshave the cachet of Agatha Dempsey.

I toasted her memory. There was regret there, too, of course, because I never had got round to demanding my usual fee upfront. Some shamus I was….

The sister's name was Elinor and she was parked on the chair outside my office when I arrived for work next morning. I recognised her face from the society pages. She was a few inches taller than Agatha, with auburn hair and a sharp, shrewd face. A black two-piece and matching veil: the look suited her. Like her sister, she was unmarried, but I reckoned the reasons were different. While Agatha liked to play the field for the field's sake, Elinor had not yet found any man equal to her or deserving of her. I unlocked the door without saying anything, and left it wide open after I'd walked in, switching on the fan and draping my jacket over the chair. I was dabbing my neck with a handkerchief when she decided she might as well come in.

'You're Regan?' she asked.

'And good morning to you, Miss Dempsey.' I gestured for her to sit, but she preferred to stand.

'Anthony tells me you were working for my sister. Funny she never mentioned you.'

'Did she always confide her secrets?'

'We were close.'

'Well, I'm sorry for your loss.'

'Thank you. Daddy is inconsolable…' Her voice almost cracked, and I asked if she wanted some water. She shook her head and cleared her throat.

It would be a great kindness to me, Mr Regan, if you felt able to say what your connection was to Agatha. The last thing I want is for some ugly story to rear its head, despoiling all our fond memories of her.'

The speech sounded prepared, but that didn't mean it wasn't heartfelt. She was looking at me and I could sense the lifetime of pent-up emotion. I wondered if her own demise would have left her father 'inconsolable'. I reckoned his younger daughter, fluttering around the world like some rare and beautiful butterfly, would have been the old bastard's favourite.

'Please,' she said, almost in a whisper.

'Will you at least sit?' I asked. She did so. 'It's really nothing to worry about,' I explained. 'Agatha owed money to a man called Albert Deutz. She needed time to pay and asked me to negotiate on her behalf. That's all there is to it.'

She spent some time digesting this, after which her whole body seemed to unclench, the tension lifting from her face.

'That's all?' she asked.

I shrugged my agreement.

'I want to thank you for confiding in me,' she said crisply, rising to her feet again and readying to leave.

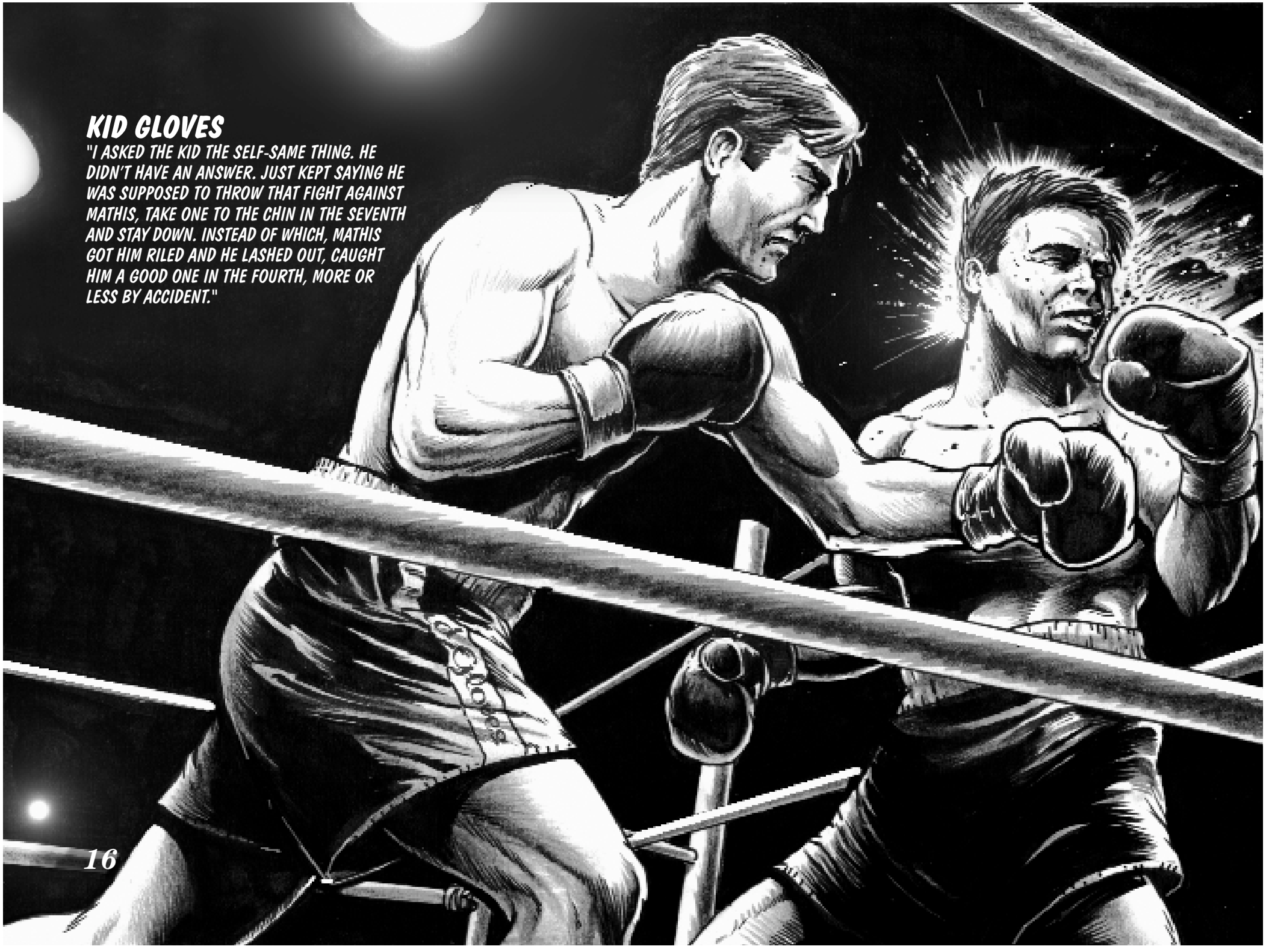
'Maybe I have a few questions of my own, Miss Dempsey,' I said, but she shook her head, sent the briefest of smiles in my general direction, and walked out. I pushed my chair back a little so I could put my feet up on the desk, one shoe crossed over the other. Then I got to work rolling the first cigarette of my working day. Elinor Dempsey had been businesslike, no doubt about that. She hadn't wanted to know how much was owed, or why Agatha had come to me. Some huge weight had been shifted from her and I had no idea what it was or why.

It was approaching lunchtime when Anthony Costello phoned me.

'So you felt able to tell Elinor what you couldn't bring yourself to tell me,' he drawled.

'I got to thinking that Agatha was no longer an actual client,' I explained.

'Don't sweat it, Regan - Elinor has that effect on men. Is this Albert Deutz fellow going to become a problem?'


KID GLOVES
"I ASKED THE KID THE SELF-SAME THING. HE DIDN'T HAVE AN ANSWER. JUST KEPT SAYING HE WAS SUPPOSED TO THROW THAT FIGHT AGAINST MATHIS, TAKE ONE TO THE CHIN IN THE SEVENTH AND STAY DOWN. INSTEAD OF WHICH, MATHIS GOT HIM RILED AND HE LASHED OUT, CAUGHT HIM A GOOD ONE IN THE FOURTH, MORE OR LESS BY ACCIDENT."

'Not if someone bothers to reimburse him.'

'Perhaps I'll have a word.' He sounded just about ready to ring off, but I asked him about Kid Gloves.

'Decided to change his story,' Costello confided, maybe reckoning that he owed me that much. 'The stuff about Rosetta wasn't getting him anywhere, so now he's being set up by the mob.'

'Which mob?'

'Danny Booth's.'

'Well, that doesn't wash - why would Booth of all people want Agatha dead?'

'I asked The Kid the self-same thing. He didn't have an answer. Just kept saying he was supposed to throw that fight against Mathis, take one to the chin in the seventh and stay down. Instead of which, Mathis got him riled and he lashed out, caught him a good one in the fourth, more or less by accident.'

I recalled what Deutz had said: his money - the safe money - had been on Mathis in the seventh…

'Here's the other thing,' Costello went on. 'Danny Booth may be out of jail in time for the funeral.'

'How come?'

'Expensive lawyers and questions about money changing hands.'

'You mean pay-offs to witnesses?' I was remembering the rumour about Costello's dad.

'Expenses may have been reimbursed.' The DA didn't sound at all comfortable. 'Of course, Booth won't be allowed anywhere near the cemetery - The Duke will see to that…'

I thought for a moment, then asked Costello if he gave any credence to The Kid's story.

'A fixed bout? I dare say they happen from time to time, even in this fine upstanding city of ours.'

'And Danny Booth's boys were the ones doing the fixing? You've got to admit, they might have been a bit sore at The Kid…'

'Comes back to the same point though - why punish Agatha?' Costello said his goodbyes and rung off. I took his question to the diner with me and sat down with it at the counter, ordering a sandwich and some coffee. Why punish Agatha? Maybe because they hadn't known who she was. This had happened in Poortown, not the sort of place you'd expect someone like her to be loitering. If Kid Gloves had been set up, Danny Booth would know about it. He'd also want to know who had really killed his girlfriend.

And then he would have to take his revenge.

Which made things nice and simple: if the Kid was telling the truth, all the cops needed to do was find out who was missing from Booth's gang. That was the man who was running for his life, especially if Danny Booth really was on his way back…

Poortown.

Like The Kid, I'd grown up in its shadow, and it had loosened its grip on me only slowly. I had no family left in the neighborhood and the apartment building where I'd been born and raised had been demolished after an arson attack some years back. Joe Strayhorn had been a class above me in high school and had punched me in the face once for some perceived slight that had never really been explained to me. All the rest of that day I'd walked around with wads of cotton up my nose, explaining to my parents that I'd tripped over my own feet.

'Got to learn to put your hands out,' my father had said, taking my words at face value. My mother, however, had pulled me to one side later and asked who'd done it and why. I'd shaken my head; no way was I a squealer.

'Hey, Sinner Boy,' Strayhorn said as I walked into Camille's Lounge. He'd given me the nickname back then precisely because I'd kept my mouth shut - his idea of a joke; I had lied to my parents and was headed for hell. He had slick hair these days and a pencil-thin moustache and liked his jackets and ties to be as loud as the bands he booked. He was seated on a stool at the bar and held out a hand for me to shake. 'How's business treating you - mostly gum or mostly shoe?'

SINNER BOY
"HE'D GIVEN ME THE NICKNAME BACK THEN PRECISELY BECAUSE I'D KEPT MY MOUTH SHUT - HIS IDEA OF A JOKE; I HAD LIED TO MY PARENTS AND WAS HEADED FOR HELL."

'The usual mix,' I replied, easing myself on to the stool next to him and studying the empty tables. 'Customers scared off by the murder?'

Strayhorn gave a snort. 'It's a bit early in the day, that's all. You here to grill me?'

'Maybe.'

'Hell of a thing. You know how much The Kid owed on his tab?' Strayhorn shook his head slowly. 'Soon as he had the purse from that fight, he swore he'd square me.'

'Did you know he was supposed to throw it?'

'Might explain why he was drinking nervous rather than happy.'

'Was he with someone called Rosetta?'

'Could be he bought her a highball.'

'Who is she?'

'Just some broad comes in here.'

'On her own? Maybe looking for business?'

'What kind of place you think I'm running here, Sinner Boy?'

'The kind that needs to make money, whatever it takes.'

He gave me a look and went back to nursing his drink. 'You want something?'

'On the house?'

'Take a wild guess.'

'Maybe I could start a tab.'

He gave another snort but said nothing, just stirred the ice in his glass.

'Was Agatha Dempsey a regular?'

'Not especially. She liked this street though: Mangan's, Ben Tracy's place, the Grand… she did the tour.'

'By herself or with friends?'

'She *made* friends - just so long as the drinks were on her.'

'Did you see her talking to The Kid that night?'

Strayhorn shook his head.

'They didn't go out back together?'

'Another shake. 'I've been through this a dozen times with the badges.'

'Has the DA spoken to you?'

'More than once. I get the feeling he's taking it personally.

He needs to, if he wants to keep The Duke sweet. Old Man Costello has cash, but not quite the contacts of The Duke - you need both if you plan to hitch a ride to Capitol Hill.'

'You're forgetting - he's known Agatha since they were kids; even dated her for a time.'

'That's not why he's busting a gut though, is it?' Strayhorn countered. 'You're mistaking Anthony Costello for a guy with a human heart.'

When the barman approached to freshen his boss's drink,
I ordered a beer for myself, then asked Strayhorn where I could find Rosetta.

'This isn't a members' club,' he retorted. 'We don't take addresses at the door.'

'And I don't suppose you remember who was drinking with Agatha that night either?'

'She was at a table in the corner. Lighting's not too good.'

Our drinks arrived and I swallowed half the beer, deciding to leave the rest. As I got up to leave, Strayhorn spoke again.

'It bugs you, doesn't it? Me walloping you in the kisser that time…'

I tried my damnedest not to nod.

'You've always wondered why I did it,' he went on, 'but you've never had the guts to come right out and ask.' His eyes were glassy from alcohol, but he managed to focus on me. 'Well, I'll tell you anyway - it's because you looked the type.'

'The type?' I echoed.

'The type to get socked in the face,' he explained, before turning his attention to the drink in front of him. 'And not much has changed, Sinner Boy. Not much has changed…'

The alley behind Camille's was still bloodstained and the trash-cans needed emptying. I didn't linger. It only took me half an hour or so of the right questions to the right people before I had a location for Rosetta Jones. Nobody seemed to think Rosetta was the name she'd been born with, and Jones was probably an invention, too. She'd only been in Poortown a matter of months. Started off asking around for work, anything from cleaning to waitressing, then descended, as somany had done before her, to putting out for a few bucks here and there, using alcohol to dull her senses. It had cost me a scant few dollars, too, to find myself with enough information so that I was standing on the the landing of her second floor apartment, knocking on her door.

IN YOUR TOWN
"THE ALLEY BEHIND CAMILLE'S WAS STILL BLOODSTAINED AND THE TRASH-CANS NEEDED EMPTYING. I DIDN'T LINGER."
OCKTAI
Camille's
LOUNGE

A neighbour came out, took one look at me and retreated. I tried turning the handle, but the door was locked. Holding on to the handle, I leaned in against the wood and felt it flex a little, then kept leaning until the cheap lock sprang open and I was in. Unwashed dishes in the sink, a nightdress on the pillow of the single bed. Clothes on hangers in the wardrobe. There was an old envelope in one of the dressing-table drawers. It contained Rosetta Jones's other life - photographs of her growing up. Small-town setting, smiling parents. Two brothers, both slightly older than her. There she was as an infant in a posed shot, the whole family in their Sunday best in a studio somewhere. And later, at a picnic-table in a woodland clearing. She squinted into the sun, gap-toothed and grinning. Just the one picture of her as a teenager, scowling as if suddenly unwilling to be captured. Blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. I put the envelope back in the drawer, hanging on to just that one picture. Before leaving, I took a last look around, wondering how dark Rosetta Jones's life would have to get before she decided to admit defeat and slink back to the smothering embrace of her family….

Ray Brophy didn't want to meet me within a square mile of his station-house. There was a hot-dog stand next to a car-lot at the junction of 30th and McBride, and I'd already bought for both of us when his patrol-car rolled to a stop. A parasol over a makeshift wooden table provided the only shade around, and we huddled under it as we ate. The root beer came in bottles and tasted warm and flat.

'You really know how to treat a guy,' Brophy pretended to complain, wiping grease from his chin.

'I was in Camille's earlier,' I said. 'Joe Strayhorn finally told me why he almost broke my nose that time.'

Brophy couldn't help but smile. We'd been school-pals; the cotton for my nose had come from his mom's first-aid kit. 'Tell me,' he demanded.

'Apparently I have the sort of face that's deserving of a fist.'

'No argument about that.' Brophy was laughing now, bits of food dropping from his mouth. 'Felt like busting your chops a few times myself.' He gave me a wink and concentrated on his hotdog.

'So were you on duty the night it happened?' I eventually asked.

'The Dempsey kid?' Brophy nodded. 'Justice never sleeps, Regan. How many times have I told you that?'

'Who called it in?'

'Not sure they ever gave a name - this is Poortown we're talking about.'

'So what did you find when you got there?'

'I found Kid Gloves sitting against the back wall of Camille's with his head in his hands. Guy was burbling and slurring, pupils like pin-heads. Oh, and did I mention the blood, the broken bottle and the dead socialite with her dress disarranged and her underwear torn?' Brophy fixed me with a look. *'Bloodstains on the dress of the millionairess* - that's from a song, isn't it?' He watched me shrug before continuing. 'We kept the stuff about her clothes away from the press - tough enough on her family as it is.'

'She'd been assaulted?'

'What it looked like. Then had half her face removed with something that could never qualify as a surgical instrument.' He froze for a moment, remembering the scene, then thought of something. 'Your card was in her purse - is that what this is all about?'

'In a manner of speaking. The Kid is claiming he was set up for not throwing a fight.'

'I doubt that'll see him escape Old Sparky.' Brophy shook his head slowly. 'The mess he made of her… I tell you, Regan, the sister must be steel-plated.'

'She identified the body?'

Brophy nodded. 'Right there and then.'

I frowned, then it dawned on me what he meant. 'Elinor Dempsey was there? In the alley?'

'When I got there, yes.'

'News must travel fast around Poortown,' I said.

'Hasn't it always?'

'I suppose so.' But I wasn't telling the whole truth. Added to which, I was beginning to get a very bad feeling. The only certainty in my mind was, Kid Gloves was destined for that date with the electric chair….

CONTINENTAL OP
'BLOODSTAINS ON THE DRESS OF THE MILLIONAIRESS - THAT'S FROM A SONG, ISN'T IT?'
LEMONADE
ice Cold

It was a mansion, surrounded by acres of greenery tended by a small army of gardeners. Locked gates, and no one answering, so I'd left my automobile parked roadside and simply scaled the ironwork, dusting myself off afterwards and walking the length of the driveway, waving to the few workers who had decided to notice me. Huge white columns either side of double-width, solid-looking white doors without so much as a scuff or fingerprint on them. Looked like the whole structure might be repainted on a weekly or monthly basis. I rang the bell and waited. A butler in full uniform eventually opened the door, one eyebrow raised slightly as if to dismiss me without words.

'I'm here to see Elinor Dempsey,' I informed him. He looked over my shoulder for any sign of a vehicle.

'Parachute,' I explained.

His mouth twitched. 'Is she expecting you?' he drawled.

'Does the accent cost extra, pal? So far I'd say you've made it about halfway to England.'

His stony look told me he didn't like that.

'Tell her it's Regan,' I added. Then I leaned against one of the pillars and took out my tobacco and papers, letting him know I was willing to get comfortable. The door closed and stayed closed. I was most of the way down the cigarette and thinking of making a circuit of the grounds when it opened again.

'What are you doing here?' Elinor Dempsey said. She was still wearing black and it still suited her.

'Does your father know?' I asked.

'Know what?'

'The truth about Agatha.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'What do you mean?'

'Funny you happened to be in Poortown the same time as her. Funny nobody but me seems to have made anything of it.' I studied what little was left of the cigarette. 'And then there's Rosetta Jones…'

'Are you drunk, Mr Regan?'

'Would you like me to be? Maybe you'd rather slip me a Mickey Finn…' I held her gaze, held it good and hard. She took a step back into the vast marble-floored entrance-hall.

'You better come in,' she said, just about containing her fury.

There were plenty of rooms to choose from. She decided on the library. It contained more books than could be read in a lifetime, though I got the feeling no one in the house had ever tried very hard. I walked over to the window and admired the view. She poured two Scotches, a splash of soda in each, and handed me one.

'No Mickey Finn,' she assured me. Then she settled herself on a chair by the fireplace and waited to see what else I had to say.

'I can figure out some of it, but not all,' I obliged, turning to face her. 'Agatha likes to flirt with danger. That's why she enjoyed her visits to Poortown. She could buy drinks for the dregs of the city and thrill to their stories, maybe even pretend to live their kind of life for a little while.' I took out the photo of Rosetta Jones and held it up so Elinor could see it. 'Then there was a girl from Hicksville who found herself heading downwards. Agatha would listen to her, maybe seemed sympathetic. They even looked similar - could've been sisters, in the right kind of light. For some reason, Agatha needs to disappear. It's a lot easier to do that if no one's going to be looking for you. Someone from Agatha's background, though… hard just to vanish.' I paused. 'Unless you're dead, of course.'

'This is the most bizarre thing I've ever heard.'

'Just wait - it gets weirder.' I crossed to the fireplace and took the chair opposite her, leaning forwards, elbows on knees, so that there was almost no distance between us. 'Easy enough to lure Rosetta into the alley. Pretty straightforward to overpower her and kill her. But then her face has to be disfigured so it's
harder for someone to say she's not Agatha Dempsey. Place Agatha's purse beside her and make sure Agatha's sister is first on the scene to make the identification. Closed casket because of the disfigurement, and suddenly you've got away with it.
Which still leaves a few questions. Notably: why involve Kid Gloves, and why the need for the whole production in the first place?'

THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT
"THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT, MR REGAN. DO YOU KNOW WHO I'M TALKING ABOUT?"

'You do realise how ludicrous this all sounds?'

'Will it sound so ludicrous to your father?' I watched as she almost flinched. 'His beautiful daughter - and suddenly he's being told she's not dead after all. Don't you think he'd want that casket opened so he could take a good hard look at whoever's inside it? The hair may be similar - blonde and drawn back in a ponytail - but the shape of the face? The ankles? The arms…?'

'This is quite insane.' She leapt to her feet and walked to the bookshelves, leaning against them for support.

'An innocent man is going to fry, Miss Dempsey. A man who doesn't know he was drugged.' I was thinking of Ray Brophy's words: *pupils like pin-heads*. 'Maybe you reckoned you needed that fall guy, otherwise all hell would break loose. Not just The Duke, but Danny Booth, too - all looking for the killer. You couldn't risk that. But Rosetta worked the streets, so you could point her in the direction of the lonely hulk at the bar, get her to slip something into his drink. Maybe you told her that way she could get her money without having to do anything. Arrange to meet him in the alley, wait for him to pass out and take his cash.' I nodded slowly, only just getting it. 'That's how it happened, isn't it? But I still don't get the why. Albert Deutz was never going to lay a finger on Agatha…'

She spun towards me and bared her teeth. 'This isn't about Deutz!' she snarled. 'You perfect damned fool!'

'Who then?'

The silence lengthened while she summoned up whatever effort it was going to take to say the name out loud. When it came, it fairly exploded from her.

Danny Booth's name.

'Booth?' I echoed.

She confirmed as much with a nod. And now that it was out there, she seemed immediately calmer. She'd been calm, too, in my office, once she'd been persuaded that my connection to her sister had no bearing on the murder. I watched as she sat down again, placing her hands in her lap.

'My sister,' she said, 'was feeding information about Booth and his men to Anthony Costello, who, in turn, put word out that his own father had been paying people on the street for that same information.

That way, Agatha was protected - or so we thought. But Booth started to suspect, and Agatha learned from Anthony that Booth's lawyers were planning his release from prison. He would kill her, no two ways about it.'

I tried to take this in. 'Does Costello know?'

'About the switch?' Elinor Dempsey shook her head.

'He must have an inkling.'

'If he does, I can deal with it.'

I looked at her. 'How?'

'By marrying him. I dare say he'd like nothing better.'

She said this in a matter-of-fact way, and I began to wonder if she wasn't every bit as nutty as her sister.

'Whose idea was this?' I asked.

'Agatha's.'

'And you went along with it?'

'As I think I told you, we're very close.'

'You've killed an innocent woman in cold blood, and now an innocent man's going to die, too…'

'I've heard tell that boxer's days would have been numbered in any case.'

'But all the same - he didn't do anything.'

'He is immaterial, Mr Regan. What matters in this room, right now, is what you intend to do.'

'I can't let you get away with it.'

'Whyever not?' She sounded genuinely surprised.

'Because.'

'Don't be an idiot. No one's going to believe you.'

I held up the photograph again. 'Rosetta Jones's family might.' I started to get to my feet. She stood up with me, her face inches from mine.

'Then there's something else you need to know.' She paused, as if still making up her mind. Her hands were working away at each other, though I doubted she was aware of it.

'I'm listening,' I said.

'The devil made me do it, Mr Regan. Do you know who I'm talking about?'

I had to admit that I didn't, so she took a deep breath and tried again.

'My father was… *inordinately* fond of Agatha.' She angled her head a little. 'You know what I mean? *Inordinately* fond. That's the other reason she couldn't just run away. She had to be beyond his reach. And with Agatha gone, marriage may be my own best bet.' She was looking down at the floor, polished to within an inch of its life, though its only purpose was to be walked all over. 'Now go and do whatever you feel you must. But please sleep on it first.' She walked across to the door and opened it, readying to usher me out of her life.

He was standing right there.

Duke Dempsey.

Face red with fury behind his silver whiskers, hand already drawn back to deliver an almighty slap to his elder daughter's cheek. The blow sent her staggering back into the library. Dempsey followed her in, leaving the door ajar.

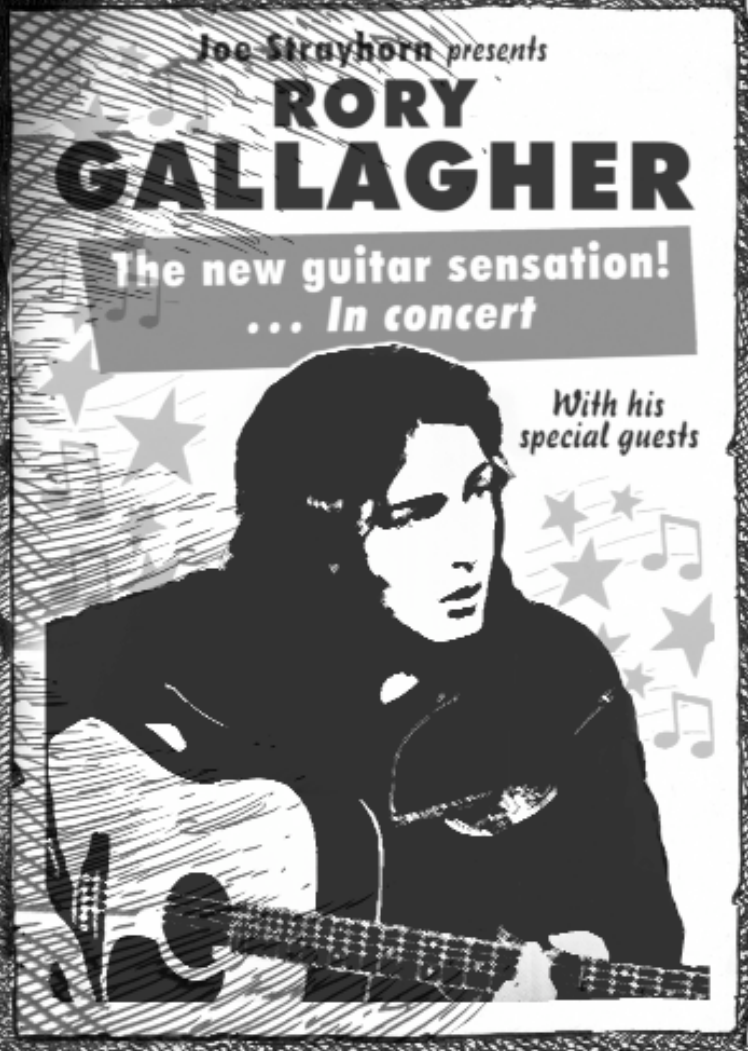
'Where is she?' he demanded, voice trembling. 'Tell me where you're keeping her!'

'Daddy,' she sobbed, holding up her fists in front of her face, like a boxer warding off further blows in a rigged fight. But The Duke had turned his head towards me. He held out a shaking hand, jabbing with one finger. 'This is not your concern, sir,' he barked. I looked from father to daughter and back again.

'Too damned right,' I agreed, making for the doorway, leaving them to their own private hell - even when she said my name, said it more than once, pleading with me to turn back.

Outside the sun was beating down from another cloudless sky. The lawn was being manicured, shrubs primped and preened. One of the gardeners made a joke, causing the others to laugh. Life, in that moment, was good. I was twenty minutes from my office and apartment, and a further twenty from Poortown. But I was still trapped in the Lie Factory, and the production-line wasn't shutting down anytime soon.

THE END



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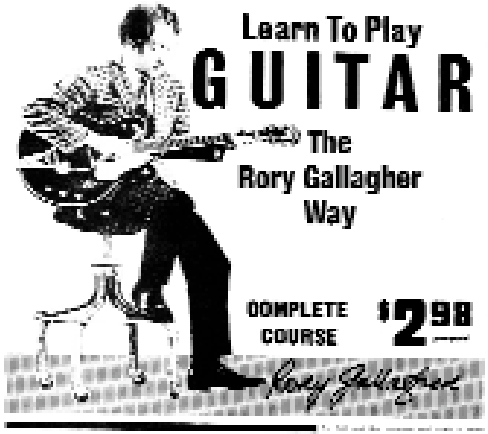

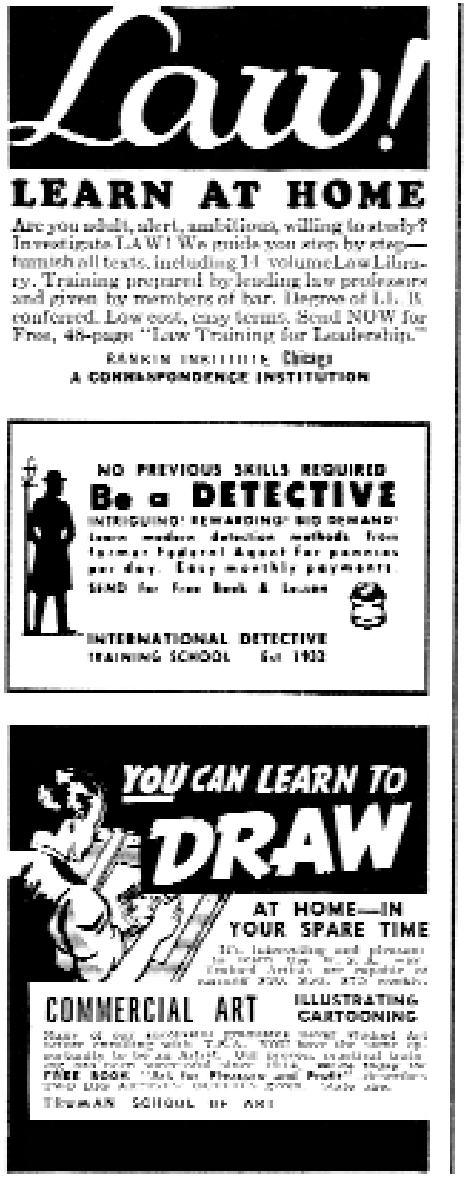
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